

# Power, Gender and the Nation: Negotiations of Belonging in Evelyn Conlon's Short Story "Park-Going Days"

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**Abstract.** In the central decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the feminine icons of "Mother Church" and "Mother Ireland" were set as conduct models to follow by Irish women. Simultaneously, legal, moral and economic forces collaborated in limiting the scope of their agency. In order to elicit where women situated and how female expressions of belonging and not belonging took shape, this article uses intersectionality to look into the short story "Park-Going Days" authored by women's rights activist and writer Evelyn Conlon. The plot displays the ambivalent feelings of the newcomer, a childless married woman, towards the other women in the community and her difficulties fitting in. At the same time, this story provides the reader with the unspoken personal experiences of these women in relation to marriage, work and motherhood. Thus, the analysis will show how this situation is constructed and understood by the author. Besides, the use of intersectionality will allow a multi-level analysis to unveil the interdependence of structures, social categories and representations that result in socially constructed forms of differentiation and exclusion for (some) women, and the consequent forms of resistance and consent. Finally, new paths for literary analysis are suggested within the frame of intersectionality.

**Key Words.** Ireland, Motherhood, Intersectionality, Exclusion, Belonging.

**Resumen.** En las décadas centrales del siglo XX, los iconos femeninos "Madre Iglesia" y "Madre Irlanda" se presentaron como los modelos de conducta a seguir por las mujeres irlandesas. Al mismo tiempo, una serie de fuerzas legales, morales y económicas colaboraron para limitar el alcance de su capacidad de actuación. Con el fin de inferir el posicionamiento de las mujeres y cómo se fueron conformando las diversas expresiones femeninas de pertenencia y no pertenencia, este artículo utiliza la interseccionalidad para analizar el relato "Park-Going Days" de Evelyn Conlon, escritora y activista por los derechos de las mujeres. La trama muestra los sentimientos ambivalentes de la recién llegada, una mujer casada sin hijos, hacia las otras mujeres de la comunidad, y sus dificultades para encajar en ese colectivo. Al mismo tiempo, esta historia descubre al lector las experiencias personales silenciadas de estas mujeres en relación con el matrimonio, el trabajo y la maternidad. Así, el análisis mostrará cómo la autora construye y entiende esta situación. Además, el uso de la interseccionalidad permitirá un análisis a varios niveles que revele la interdependencia existente entre las estructuras, las categorías sociales y las representaciones, lo que se traducirá en formas socialmente construidas de diferenciación y exclusión para (algunas de) las mujeres, y las consiguientes formas de resistencia y de consentimiento. Por último, se proponen nuevas vías de análisis literario en el marco de la interseccionalidad.

**Palabras clave.** Irlanda, maternidad, interseccionalidad, exclusión, pertenencia.

## Introduction

During the decades following the Civil War, the Government of Ireland devoted itself to reconstructing a nation that had been a colony for several centuries. Aided by a protectionist national policy, the State cultivated its own rigid and uncompromising version of Republican Motherhood based on a self-sacrificing attitude that would put the good of the nation above any personal desire (Valiulis 1995, 2011). That political, economic and ideological process served to revive the old concept of “Mother Ireland” which took a new shape under the dictates of the State and the Catholic Church. Thus, in the central decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the feminine icons of Mother Church and Mother Ireland were presented as conduct models to follow to the extent that women were “actively interpellated as national subjects through identification with territory, soil, land and landscape” (Gray 1999: 205). In practice, that meant a tough legal and moral control over the Irish population founded on traditional patriarchal values.

According to Heather Ingman, “nations construct their identity around fixed concepts of gender” (2007: 3), and Ireland has been no exception as, for too many decades, the social status of women was framed by institutions that oppressed them one way or another. These institutions, identified as family and household structures, and employment and welfare policies, were supported in the 1937 Constitution. More particularly, in terms of employment, by 1926 only 6% of married women were working outside the home and this figure remained low until the 1960s (O’Dowd 1987: 27). Consequently, the vast majority of the married women were economically dependent on their husbands what inevitably had an impact on their personal autonomy and agency. Accordingly, a series of laws designed to seclude women and mothers in the home were passed in the 1920s and 1930s (Steiner-Scott 1997). At the same time, all sorts of violent behaviour were secluded within the walls of the home and socially perceived as domestic affairs. Legal attention to the matter had to wait until 1996 when the *Domestic Violence Act* was passed.

In response to that multi-tiered repressive

context, women exerted many forms of negotiation to accomplish some degree of agency. For example, Gray and Ryan (1997), O’Keefe (2013) and Walter (2014) among others, have indicated that the main causes of migration among women were poor labour conditions and dismal social prospects and dissatisfaction or disagreement with certain aspects of Irish society and morality. Unlike other European nations, it all led to a higher rate of female than male migration in the central decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Walter 2004). Those women who remained in the island were ideologically, economically and socially pushed to become wives-and-mothers. Contrary to this mandate, many of them found ways to contest the norms, as Inglis has summarized:

For most of the last century they had (in comparison with other Western societies) the lowest levels of marriage and, correspondingly, the highest levels of bachelors and spinsters. On the other hand, Ireland had [...] the highest level of marital fertility. This meant that those who did get married tended, in comparison with married women in other Western societies, to have a large number of children (2005: 10).

A slow turn in the Irish arena for women would start in 1972 with the publication of the *First Commission on the Status of Women*. A year later, Ireland joined the European Economic Community allowing new opportunities for change.

Contextualisation of the social, political and religious elements that frame the short story “Park-Going Days” is essential in order to interpret Conlon’s literary portrayal of Irish women, “an often submerged population group within the public life of the nation” (Ingman 2009: 17). The author’s political background will also be considered as a relevant element in the framing of women’s agency and their multiple forms of inclusion and exclusion.

## The Intersectional Approach

According to the aforementioned context, it seems obvious that institutional and social dimensions intersect with personal and collective performances to negotiate notions of identity and belonging. In order to elicit how Irish women were represented in literature and how female experiences of inclusion/exclusion

were shaped, an intersectional analysis needs to be implemented, in order to enrich the gender lens by shifting the focus to encompass other dimensions (Brah and Phoenix 2004). For intersectionality it is essential “to look at the way in which different social divisions inter-relate in terms of the production of social relations and in terms of people’s lives” (Anthias 2008: 13). Experiences of belonging and not belonging are complex practices shaped by the intersection of categories and spheres that are not fixed but evolving. Thus, different analytical levels need to be examined in order to understand how those interrelations operate to produce every day practices. Belonging and identity, while close to each other, are two independent notions. While belonging stresses the emphasis on experiences of access and participation and frequently refers to a dynamic process, identity involves “a retreat from issues of structure and there is a tendency to treat it as a possessive attribute of individuals or groups, rather than a process” (Anthias 2008: 7).

In society, systemic structures dictate the rules to follow. These rules respond to an ideology that is put into practice through socially accepted formulas of behaviour, customs or habits that validate, in turn, those rules. As inequity is never the result of a single factor, an analysis of the intersections of different power relations and experiences is paramount. Moreover, unveiling the power relations that underlie social behaviours requires a three-dimensional analysis covering the personal, the social and the institutional spheres. These three areas of activity are interconnected and weave an invisible web that surrounds their inhabitants’ experiences of belonging. Also, categories such as gender, age, race or class, to name a few, have their imprints in daily practice. This universe of possibilities and limitations is, in turn, embodied or contested in everyday performances. Overcoming post-structuralist strands, intersectional analysis focuses on “how the differential situatedness of different social agents constructs the ways they affect and are affected by different social, economic and political projects” (Yuval-Davis 2011a: 4). It also moves beyond single or group-specific identities and connects the particular with the

systemic multiple forms of oppression in order to generate a better understanding of its origins, performances and solutions. Thanks to its wide scope of analysis, intersectionality is a useful tool to approach literary productions where inequality is present. It also serves to look at the complex factors that shape human lives and how these are represented in the literary corpus. As the selected story concentrates on ordinary life events of a specific group, namely Irish married mothers, this approach helps to distinguish the focus of disaggregation that the protagonist, a newcomer and a childless married woman, experiences in relation to that homogeneous group, and society to a larger extent.

#### “Park-Going Days” and the Negotiations of Belonging

While “Park-Going Days” was first published in 1987, more than a decade later it was selected by its author for inclusion in the short story volume *Cutting the Night in Two* (2001). Co-edited with Hans Christian Oeser, this compilation is entirely devoted to Irish women short story writers and is conceived as a means of rectifying the “unfortunate fragmentation of the female voice coming from Ireland” (Conlon and Oeser 2001: 7). Truly, their effort counters the insufficient attention paid by mainstream critical discourse to Irish short fiction, and more particularly to female authors (Estévez Saá 2007; Ingman 2009). Although no specific statement regarding the reprint of “Park-Going Days” has been expressed, it seems necessary to explore the many elements that make this story a piece worth re-reading.

Firstly, Evelyn Conlon is an acclaimed short story writer who has published three short story collections and four novels to this day. But she is also known for having taken a major role in fighting for women’s rights in the last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. At a time when second-wave feminism gave birth to an extraordinary cultural activism in Ireland (O’Toole 2005; Meaney 2007), Evelyn Conlon got involved in her early 20s in the Irish Women United group, founded in 1975, as well as in its magazine *Banshee*. A decade later, her collections of short stories were published by Attic Press, Ireland’s only feminist publishing house by then. In particular,

her first volume, *My Head is Opening* (1987), to which the selected short story firstly belonged, clearly reflects “the tensions of life in a state in which women are still very much second-class citizens” (according to Evelyn Conlon’s official website).<sup>1</sup> Undoubtedly, Conlon’s committed writing is intimately marked by her personal history and engagement with the feminist cause. Her ideological stance has had an impact on her view of herself as a writer, and she admits that she has had a feeling of “writing from a marginalised position” (Pelan 1995: 111). This article will try to analyse how social, political and cultural transformations are perceived by Conlon and how female agency is portrayed in “Park-Going Days”.

Secondly, while all thirty-four writers included in *Cutting the Night in Two* would deserve close attention, Conlon’s short story “Park-Going Days” is notable for its subtle and heartrending account of the difficulties Rita, the newcomer, has to fit in a female community where motherhood is at the centre. Conlon’s sensitivity and acuteness focus on the experiential alterations and distortions that challenge the ideological notion of motherhood. Narrated in the third person, the story revolves around a park full of mothers with their children on the first sunny day of the year. The author returns once and again to that harmonious universe often interrupted by these women’s unspoken thoughts and feelings that give a bitter account of the vital and emotional toll that this idyllic picture entails for each of them. Recalling particular episodes of their lives, issues such as income inequality, pregnancy out of wedlock, alcoholism and family violence, are brought up within domestic scenes and presented as constitutive parts of these women’s ordinary lives. Meanwhile, the reader sees Rita, the new resident, walk out to the shops and keep to herself unable to fit in that group. Her urban origins, her marriage to a “culchie” and her independent ways would increase the women’s interest in newcomers as much as their rejection to the type of woman she represents.

In the plot, Evelyn Conlon manages to keep the reader in suspense, her narration full of ironic digressions, to finally reveal that the absence of children is Rita’s ultimate reason for self and extrinsic exclusion. In the end, when she is asked to join the women in the park and sit and exchange casual comments, the gap between their two worlds becomes evident. The following day she starts packing with mixed feelings of fear and determination and before the rest of the women can know more about her, Rita and her husband leave the neighbourhood. The narration leads the reader through a domestic universe where the dichotomy belonging/not belonging is at the centre of the plot. In “Park-Going Days”, issues of identity and belonging intertwine in a political, social and economic context that puts women at the core of a national discourse that paradoxically oppresses them. Far from being an isolated phenomenon, this story’s concerns parallel other contemporary productions by authors who also deal with female alienation, sense of displacement, helplessness, or lack of tolerance, such as Julia O’Faolain, Jennifer Johnston or Juanita Casey (Estévez Saa 2007: 148).

The object of this article is to explore the scope of Irish women’s agencies as presented in this short story and their interrelation with the structures that framed everyday practices. Many voices have agreed on the realistic tone followed by most Irish women short story writers who seem often concerned with the private sphere of experience (Smyth 1990; Patten 1996; Wills 2002). Other scholars (Cleary 2007; Innes 2000) have acknowledged the presence of naturalism in 20<sup>th</sup> century Irish literature “to reproduce not just a world that appears *real* to the spectators but a specific understanding of how that *real world* works” (Harris 2014). Navigating these waters, “Park-Going Days” uses an intimate tone and focuses on the female characters’ emotions and feelings in ordinary contexts. However, a careful reading also shows a deliberate use of literary devices and formal alterations that raise personal performances to a social and structural level. Thus, while the author enriches her narration with a master use of irony and satire, both as an inquiry and a provocation to the reader (Terrazas Gallego 2013), she also

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1. For more information, visit [www.evelynconlon.com](http://www.evelynconlon.com).

unveils the intersections that both cause and perform ordinary practices of belonging and not belonging. Undoubtedly, Conlon's advocacy for women's rights intertwines with her literary production and enriches it with her personal insight.

As suggested by the title, the park, a public physical space, is a recurrent image in "Park-Going Days". It represents a meeting point for the mothers in the neighbourhood, but at the same time, it is also the space where the protagonist encounters social rejection. The park is the place where mothers and children go to on sunny days. Its function is to serve as a means for cohesion, an arena where equals acknowledge each other and build a sense of community, of bonding and belonging (Inglis 2005). Purposely, the author leaves aside the rest of the women within the community, i.e. widows, spinsters or younger unmarried women, to focus the reader's attention on this specific group. So, the story begins describing a scene where mothers and children go to the park on the first day of summer. Hence, going to the park symbolizes a celebration of mainstream motherhood and it stands out as the only public space where they seem to have a prominent role. This right, however, entails some obligations. Going to the park is preceded by some rituals that attest to these women's primary role as caretakers. As the narration illustrates, all the women in this group would tacitly wait until ten past two to open their doors and march towards the park, "not in deference to Jack eating, but because Jack's wife wouldn't be free until then, and there was nothing to make a woman feel housebound like all the other women trooping up to the park before her" (PGD 279).<sup>2</sup> This ambivalence demonstrates a certain degree of solidarity among these women, but at the same time it also reveals consent with the socially accepted behaviours that place women's interests in a subordinated position. Equally, other practices present in the story contribute to unifying the categories of woman-mother-caretaker. For example, when going out to the

park, the women would carry all sorts of stuff for the care of their children rendering them "nearly invisible behind all the paraphernalia" (PGD 280). Masterfully, Evelyn Conlon depicts here a scene where women get obfuscated by their role as mothers. These social practices embody a discrete form of oppression consistent with sections 1 and 2 of Article 41.2. of the 1937 Constitution.

Accordingly, the women in the community are frequently presented as passive subjects who seem unable to speak out and share deep feelings: "(...) they settled in their chairs and watched their collective new generation (...). They uttered unconnected sentences at random. Conversation was organised only when there was tragedy or scandal to be related" (PGD 282). This scene matches the conclusions of critics and historians on the impact of the Irish nationalist ideology on women's behaviour. In their view, the roles assigned to the Irish woman from the 1930s onwards were passive, lacking passion, vitality and independence (Coulter 1993; Kiberd 1995; Valiulis 1995; Del Campo del Pozo 2014). Therefore, it is not surprising that in "Park-Going Days" the author projects her concerns about women's limited scope of agency impersonated in that group of women. In opposition, only Rita, the childless wife, is left out of the picture. She is new in the neighbourhood and somehow she does not belong. On the contrary, she is considered an alien to the female community and their distrust makes them reject her: "They were sick of her kind, really – never any children, coming to live in that rented house, teasing their curiosity and staying aloof" (PGD 285). It is clear that Rita's independent ways, her social mobility and her freedom distinguish her from the rest and cause annoyance among the other women. It is here where power shows its relational dynamics from an intersectional perspective. Her status is ambivalent and she simultaneously experiences oppression and power in different contexts. This contradictory position demonstrates that the negotiations of power at discursive and structural levels also alter the subject's position and category. Rita is not bound to the park by motherhood and her role as a caretaker is less obvious than the rest of the female characters'. This situation puts her in an awkward position because her freedom

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2. Evelyn Conlon's *Park-Going Days* (1987). Hereafter the cited references will be referred to as PGD with pagination.

turns into the cause of rejection by the mainstream group to the point that she intimately desires to belong: “One thing Rita regretted not having was park days with mothers” (*PGD* 286). Loneliness is the price she must pay for being different. Undoubtedly, the complexity of the human heart and the longing for acceptance remain at the core of the story.

Other reasons for Rita’s exclusion are her marked urban origin and her mobility. As Inglis reflects, opprobrium on women had not so much to do with sexual transgression but more with the violation of “traditional notions of motherhood” (2005: 6), referring to the old concepts of “mother church” and “mother Ireland” as discussed by Innes (1993: 26-42). In the story, Rita and her husband rent a house and are used to moving frequently, a kind of freedom the rest of the women lack. So, instead of going to the park, she keeps to herself and walks to the shops on her own. She consciously behaves coldly as if wanting to keep a distance only allowing “casual comments passed between them as strangers” (*PGD* 280). Objectively, this passage illustrates how Rita, who is despised by the female community, is also able to exert her power to choose. She actively excludes herself from belonging and by doing so, she de-naturalises socially accepted behaviours and habits. Ultimately, through this character, Evelyn Conlon problematises the national construction of womanhood.

Consistent with the social context presented earlier, the scope of the control exerted upon Irish women covered many areas that Evelyn Conlon wisely introduces in the story. So, the apparent simplicity of the gatherings in the park is ingeniously enriched with short incursions into some of those women’s lives. Tackling different aspects of ordinary life, and most probably influenced by her personal engagement, Conlon recalls meaningful scenes that illustrate the multi-layered exclusions Irish women had to face and the multiple ways in which power and resistance were exercised. Interestingly, these brief episodes relate one way or another to their married condition: “They shifted their fat bodies around on the deck chairs. They had suffered from the usual

disappointments being married to their husbands” (*PGD* 282). One after another, common vices and unspoken frustrations are displayed with fine irony and humour. So, the reader knows about Kathleen’s injured heart by her husband’s lack of companionship during her pregnancy to the point that he “had been mortified one day when she was nearly due and she’d sat down on the steps of the bank in town, not fit to move another inch” (*PGD* 283). Here his mortification must be read as the personal enactment of a gendered cultural and social behaviour that maintained a severe wall between men’s issues and women’s biology. That, in turn, addresses ideological norms that secluded women within the threshold of the home. In fact, it is the blatant exposure of a heavy pregnancy in a public space what threatens to undermine the strict division of gendered performances imposed by the rules and confirmed by social behaviour. Similarly, “Deirdre’s man, the drinker, did his bit for his children” (*PGD* 283) writes Conlon, only to add ironically that his bit consisted of a chat about them with other pub fellows. Both the pub and the bank are depicted as spaces only inhabited by men and therefore, references to wives and children can only be incidental. Meanwhile, the story does not discuss Rita’s marital experience but her isolation also indicates a persistent separation of spheres. All in all, these untold experiences illustrate how social behaviours were connected with the systemic forms of oppression included in article 41.2 of the 1937 Constitution.

The author’s commitment to women’s rights is very present in the story as not only husbands’ deficiencies are discussed in these digressions. Through Molly’s experience as a working woman, the author denounces the gender pay gap that affected women in general and more acutely married women. Both limited labour force participation and low income rates are gendered indicators that diminish women’s independence. Structural and social forces interact on simultaneous levels to problematise the married status for women in relation to the workforce. The result of this tension is the underpayment of female workers. These discriminatory practices stigmatize married women

(and only women) by means of further reducing their income and forcing them to remain home and become dependent citizens, as Conlon exemplifies: “She’d been getting eleven pounds before the wedding, now with tax it was only five, so there wasn’t much point in her going to work for the short while. The bus fare was two pounds” (*PGD* 283). After much agitation by the women’s movement, of which Evelyn Conlon had been an active member, the practice of “marriage bar” was removed in Ireland only in 1974 when the *Anti-Discrimination (Pay) Act* was passed in compliance with European Commission directives (Cassidy, Strobl and Thornton 2002). Before that time, the only legal grounds to this practice were Article 41.2.2. and Article 45.4.2. of the 1937 Constitution which attempted to restrict the employment opportunities of women though they did not specifically prohibit their participation in the workforce. That is why, in order to provide this discriminatory practice with a moral justification, other socially accepted forces had to be put into play. An example can be found in the publication of De Valera’s statement about Irish women’s place: “Everyone knows there is little chance of having a home in the real sense if there is no woman in it, the woman is really the home-maker” (*Irish Press*, 26 June 1937). Reports on the evolution of the Irish workforce are conclusive: only five per cent of married women were in the labour force in 1961; in 1994, this proportion increased up to thirty-three per cent (Smyth 1997). In the light of these figures, it can be concluded that the State and its legal apparatus, the Catholic Church and its moral judgment, as well as the media, effectively contributed to discriminatory gendered behaviour despite social mobilisation and objection on the part of some civic organisations.

It cannot be denied that the author’s second wave feminist views are present in “Park-Going Days” as Conlon’s sharp perception of these customs also incorporates the personal and emotional consequences of such social practices. In her short story, Molly’s agency as a worker is also symbolically denied after her marriage. Once she has quit her job, her only link to the workforce is her daily call to her husband, a habit that he soon puts an end to

arguing that “the men at work would start talking” (*PGD* 283). Here, the interaction between husband and wife is presented as an awkward and somewhat treacherous relation loaded with many more unspoken constraints: “He smiled. She smiled. It was a small subtle exclusion, preparation for the major ones” (*PDG* 283).

As the story develops, husbands are generally depicted as poor companions in marriage and motherhood. These hopeless and cold-hearted men seem to live in a parallel world where the troubles of raising children and running a household have no room. Interestingly, the treatment wives receive depending on the kind of man they married is a shared feature in the literature of that time. For example, in “First Conjugation”, first published in 1981, O’Faolain tells the story of an Italian teacher who has patiently borne with her husband’s sexual scandals for years. At first sight, one of her adolescent pupils regards her with adoration, but her devotion turns into dislike and rejection when she hears: “She is just a housewife. Nobody has anything against her. She adores him and puts up with a lot. He is a bastard to her” (*FC* 281).<sup>3</sup> From then on, any possibility of being an example to follow is destroyed. Correspondingly, Evelyn Conlon’s story shows contempt for Bridie whose husband “[...] had kept running from one country to the other, filling himself up with experience” but who “was no help to Bridie” (*PGD* 283). Similarly, Rita is despised by the community because of her husband’s rural origins: “You wouldn’t mind so much marrying a culchie but getting *used* to him” (*PGD* 285). Again, a woman’s status is influenced by that of her husband’s what indicates a social perception of female dependence. What is more, through these digressions, Evelyn Conlon brings to the front how social practices may result in practices of exclusion for Irish women when they deviate from the norms. The author’s feminist views about marriage are wonderfully expressed through a metaphor that uses wedding rings as

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3. Julia O’Faolain’s *First Conjugation* (1981). Hereafter the cited references will be referred to as *FC* with pagination.

oppressive symbols: “they put one ring on one finger, sometimes along with another, varying in degrees of vulgarity and awfulness. The rings marked stages in their self-denial and destruction” (*PGD* 281). In all the different examples the story tells, the intersection of systemic power relations covers the structural and the personal spheres that at the same time interact and shape each other. Through these forms of exclusion, Conlon is illustrating what Yuval-Davis considers the politics of belonging that consists of “specific political projects aimed at constructing belonging to particular collectivity/ies which are themselves being constructed in these projects in very specific ways and in very specific boundaries” (2011b: 10). The selected particular stories confirm that social hierarchy and negotiations of belonging and not belonging are male-dominated in the Irish society of the time. But most importantly, they represent the range of diverse forms of exclusion within the group. Breaking with the idea of homogeneity, Conlon exposes a variety of problems and disappointments to illuminate the multiple forms of exclusion that the alteration of normative gendered roles entails.

As a plus, this story also draws the reader’s attention to the controversial symbolic representation of womanhood. The interrelation between the nation, its landscape and the female body as objects to possess has been widely studied (Nash 1993 and 1994). According to De Valera’s famous St. Patrick’s Day address in 1943, Ireland should be:

[...] a land whose countryside would be bright with cosy homesteads, whose fields and villages would be joyous with sounds of industry, the romping of sturdy children, the contests of athletic youths, the laughter of comely maidens; whose firesides would be the forums of the wisdom of serene old age (*Irish Press* 18<sup>th</sup> March 1943).

But in “Park-Going Days”, Evelyn Conlon’s use of rhetoric of satire, elsewhere studied by Terrazas Gallego (2013), confronts the idealized beauty of those Irish comely maidens with the physical traces of maternity in real female bodies: “These – the fat, the veins, the sighs – were the shapes of the backbone of the country” (*PGD* 284). In an act of rebellion

against the invisibilisation of actual motherhood, Conlon itemizes its consequences. To this, she adds hard and endless work as the causes of physical degradation, a fact that the protagonist witnesses late at night when she looks out of the window and thinks: “who couldn’t forgive a woman anything when they saw her struggling at that unearthly hour to silence a crying, hungry baby?” (*PGD* 285-6). Faithful to the historical time, that silent distant witness is a woman.

Conlon’s purpose goes beyond denouncing the shortcomings of married life and the price of motherhood for Irish women. In fact, she also brings to light the existing forms of exclusion for childless women. In the story, not being a mother totally excludes Rita from joining her neighbours in the park. Moreover, her failure is too shameful to be admitted and it forces her to keep on running away in an endless flight. Marriage was socially, legally and ideologically understood as “the goal for all women who could achieve it because it was the ticket to survival and security. The duties of a wife were to produce children, manage the house and share in production work, in that order of importance” (Cullen 1980: 70). Significantly, the more elusively Rita behaves the more interest she arouses among the group of mothers. But at the same time, the more they approach her, the more frightened she gets because her childlessness is depicted as the most terrible unspeakable failure: “The child had died and she wasn’t allowed to think about it” (*PGD* 286). It is at the end of the story that the reader becomes aware of the enormity of this event as it deserves the rest of the women’s exclusion and leaves Rita socially dislocated. The absence of a social space, a forum where her grief can be openly addressed parallels the ideological void where childless married women are not considered. The practical and legal invisibility of this situation is where the focus of disaggregation resides. It symbolises a contestation to the nation but at the same time it condemns Rita to loneliness and forces her and her husband to move out once and again.

Conlon’s literary representations of all these forms of exclusion are testimony to second-wave feminism’s points of contention in Ireland.



Naturalism is present in her depiction of social practices that take the form of particular experiences. The use of an intersectional analysis unveils the power relations between the personal and the institutional spheres and informs how these negotiations result in actual practices of belonging/not belonging.

### Conclusions

In “Park-Going Days” Evelyn Conlon offers an emotional account of the hegemonic discourses the new Irish State sternly imposed on its citizens and the consequences they had on women in particular. This short story addresses issues of domination, resistance, inclusion and exclusion from a gender perspective. Applying intersectionality to literary works highlights the interdependence of structures, social categories and representations that result in inequities and socially constructed forms of differentiation and exclusion. “Park-Going Days” recreates a social hierarchy where women, and particularly married women and mothers are systematically relegated to the function of caretakers. More specifically, the intersectional analysis has exposed how the constructed category of motherhood works as a form of exclusion that is enacted in concrete social behaviours illustrated by the unspoken experiences of the group of women in the park. This form of analysis unveils the intersections of legal, economic, demographic and religious forces that join to create a particular notion of womanhood intimately attached to marriage and motherhood that the author systematically denounces. As the story reveals, these women’s negotiations of belonging and not belonging take place in many spheres including work, economy, education and affection amongst others. All these forces interact and accommodate constantly as forms of resistance and compliance also play a part in the flow of history. Equally, situated subjects both affect and are affected by these interactions, as the story masterfully presents.

In any case, failure and disappointment are the result of any attempt at displaying an active role.

At a different level, this analysis also deconstructs the notion of fixed or homogeneous collectivities and discloses inner levels of exclusion within female communities. When deviations from the norm occur, they are perceived as problematic and punished with isolation and stigmatisation. In the story, Rita, the protagonist, both excludes herself and is excluded from the group of mothers. Nonetheless, at a certain point she admits to herself a desire to be part of the community, that is, to belong. In the end, her independence, her mobility and also the absence of children are the key factors that make her integration impossible. The story manages to challenge the hegemonic notion of citizenship for Irish women recreating scenes that address female exclusion from the labour market, social practices of marriage and the different costs of motherhood. Through these, Evelyn Conlon touches many issues targeted by the second-wave feminism in Ireland. In the end, her story also shows the impossibility to break through the ideological, normative and moral constraints that limited women’s agency at the time, hence opposing the feeling of belonging to the politics of belonging.

To conclude, intersectionality opens many paths for future research. A thorough comparative analysis of Conlon’s story and other contemporary short stories could offer a more complete picture of the multiple forms of oppression that Irish women suffered and how they interacted on simultaneous levels. Also a diachronic approach to the work of women writers in the Irish Republic could give light to inequality across multiple dimensions and to the multiple forms of literary contestation over time. Today, an interdisciplinary approach to literature is mandatory and intersectionality is a suitable tool to address the complexities of today’s challenges.

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